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## **Abstract**

In this paper, I wish to critically reflect on the role of emotion/s in how I position myself with regards to research, teaching and learning, drawing on experiences over the past three years as a human geography lecturer 'doing' research with refugees and asylum seekers in a local inner city area. While there has been increasing debate regarding what constitutes 'the activist academic', in particular deconstructing any dualism or border between 'academic' and 'activist', the motivation for undertaking such a role is generally ascribed to an 'ideological commitment' to social and personal change of one type or another. For me, such a commitment cannot be separated from how I *feel* about the issues that I research, learn and teach about. In particular, I explore how emotions relate across different spaces and places in my life to produce motivation for activism and how that activism – specifically the encounters with people through it – feeds back into emotional geographies across my professional (and personal) endeavours. More broadly, I'm concerned with the ways in which emotional *becomings* and the interconnectivities across spaces of activity/ism and everyday life play out beyond my own individual subjective experience, but rather are caught up in 'situated, relational perspectives' (after Bondi, 2005). I argue that recognising the significance of emotion has implications for how we conduct and disseminate research.

**Keywords:** activism, academic, emotion, affect, subjectivity, social change

### **positioning myself ...**

I felt it the moment I walked through the door.

An intangible warmth. A metaphorical embrace. A certain kind of happiness, of pleasure ... On my part, a certain kind of relief too. The smiles on all of our faces spoke it. Then the actual, physical hugs and greetings affirmed it. I can't say what 'it' is exactly. Let's call it 'emotion' for now.

And I had anticipated this moment before the door opened, on the journey to the community centre, the day before, the week before ... and in anticipation of this moment I had experienced these and other emotions ... anxiety, hope, excitement, joy, annoyance, frustration (not-quite anger). Emotions in other places, which transcended space and time to intermingle with the pleasure and relief of that moment.

I can't speak for the other people in the room, but I especially felt renewed hope, renewed anxiety. What was I doing here? How could I make a difference – could I make a difference? Or rather: how could we, all together, make any difference??

These are questions that I constantly wrestle with, have always (as far as I can remember) wrestled with. Why do I do what I do? As the title says, 'I just do' - but that's disingenuous, of course. So here is an attempt to address these issues a little more ... academically.

### **... placing my role/s ...**

The moment outlined above came recently, and needs some contextualising. For the past three years, I've been involved with refugee and asylum seekers in Byker, an inner city area of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in the north east of England. This 'work' started shortly after I was appointed as a human geography lecturer at Northumbria University, which is based in the centre of Newcastle. I had recently completed a PhD which explored issues of national

identity construction, ethnicity, racism and social and spatial in/exclusion in England (see Askins, 2004; 2006; 2008a), and I wanted to start thinking about my next research project. The PhD had predominantly engaged with second, third, fourth generation 'black and minority ethnic' groups/individuals, but some refugees and asylum seekers participated in the study too, and I was interested in working specifically with such groups. New to the city, I began making contacts with a variety of key people in Newcastle city council and local voluntary organisations, and over the course of a few months had built up some trust with a couple of different projects in the area of Byker, by attending meetings regularly and generally getting involved.

The initial idea had been to develop a participatory research project, in which the participants themselves set the research questions and agenda. I had become increasingly concerned with the ethics of doing research through the PhD process, and, while I had attempted to be 'participatory', 'non-extractive' and 'give back' to research participants (Cahill 2007; Kindon et al. 2007; Pain 2004), the structures and confines of that work had ultimately placed me in a position of power that I felt uncomfortable with (see Katz 1992; Kobasyashi 1994). Wanting to avoid being so positioned again (setting out the research themes, being time limited, delivering specific outcomes not necessarily best relevant to the people involved, etc.) I didn't apply for research funding. I was also busy writing lectures/designing modules ... Moreover, my lectureship is at a 'teaching-led' institution, where emphasis is firmly placing on 'learning and teaching': not being under pressure to bring in grant monies and/or publish 'x' papers per year enables such an unfunded, open-ended approach. There is a point to make here regarding how institutional context is significant in terms of how we may be active beyond the university (see Bingley 2002; Hansen 2008; Moss & Falconer Al-Hindi 2008).

So I began by volunteering for a specific project, run one day a week (mid-morning to mid-afternoon) by a well known national charity organisation in the UK. The charity operates a centre in Byker, open Mondays to Fridays offering advice and a variety of support services to

local people. Byker can be described as a 'stereotypical' deprived inner city area, with attendant social and economic problems such as poor housing, struggling schools, lack of healthcare provision, higher crime rates and so on, in which asylum seekers have been 'placed' in increasing numbers since 1999's Immigration and Asylum Act introduced a 'dispersal' policy (see Asylum Support 2008). I don't wish to only reiterate the negative productions attached to areas of deprivation - it is important to stress that there are also positive things happening in such areas: grassroots projects and local people/community groups being in/taking control of their lives and contesting such dominant stereotypes. The point here is that there are very real, material problems in Byker, and there remain specific tensions in the area, embedded in racialised and classed positions and productions: racism is prevalent in local white working class communities who are (generally) constructed and (often) construct themselves as losing out to (marginalised) incomers, rather than losing out to broader systems of capitalism, neoliberalism and class privilege (see Kundnani 2001; 2008; Sivanandan 2001; The Times 2007).

The project was a response by the charity to address the 'under-representation' (absence) of refugees and asylum seekers as users of their centre and its support services. Funded for two years, the charity had employed a part-time project officer to facilitate the inclusion of these groups. Previously a refugee herself from Eastern Europe, Anna<sup>1</sup> was enthusiastic and dedicated, and keen to have volunteers on the project – there were two of us. I became involved towards the end of the project, and spent a few months getting to know people: predominantly women with under school age children, mostly from across Africa and the Middle East, from a range of ages, ethnicities, religions and backgrounds, mainly asylum seekers. The group was transitory: there were new arrivals every week, others left (especially if/when people gained refugee status and were able to move away from Byker<sup>2</sup>);

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<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed to offer anonymity. Likewise the specific charity isn't detailed.

<sup>2</sup> Asylum seekers must live where the government places them, while their claim for refugee status is assessed – see <http://www.asylumsupport.info/nass.htm>

some came regularly, others now and again ... Anna organised activities largely in consultation with the project users, often related to practical information (accessing language and other adult education classes; enrolling with a doctor/dentist; getting their children in school), sometimes linked to national or local government initiatives (healthy eating; road safety; fitness/exercise, etc.), sometimes more leisure/enjoyment orientated (a series of dance classes, head massage, and invariably in conjunction with cooking and eating a meal together<sup>3</sup>). Some weeks saw over thirty parents plus young children crammed into the 'living room' and kitchen in the centre, other times there would be ten or so. One-off special events or trips out were also arranged from time to time, funding and other practical factors permitting.

The key point here is that it was a successful project in the sense that refugee and asylum seeking families were using the centre: many only accessed the specific project, but some started to attend on other days (specifically when English language lessons were run at the centre), and use the crèche facilities. It was also successful in creating a space for marginalised individuals to be with people with similar backgrounds, share experiences (if they wished), get support and support each other. Unfortunately, though, this occurred within a wider set of organisational and personal politics that were not as positive as the project itself. To cut a long narrative short, Anna and the project were considered and treated as separate from 'the normal work' of the centre by other staff and users, in line with dominant local constructions around 'us' and 'them' and access to resources mentioned above. This was despite Anna's constant attempts to engage indigenous residents in the project alongside refugees and asylum seekers, and endless encouragement to the latter to make more use of the centre outside the specific project. By the time I got involved, the atmosphere on project days beyond the spaces used by the project itself could be

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<sup>3</sup> An informal rota system saw four or five individuals volunteer to cook every week for the group as a whole – project funds paid for the food, emphasis was on sharing favourite dishes from countries of origin with each other.

unpleasant, and many of the project users discussed feeling unwelcome and uncomfortable in the centre more widely.

Anna raised these issues at levels beyond her immediate line manager at the centre, which she felt were left unresolved. Near the end of the funded period, Anna was informed that the project was not to be continued, instead the charity's 'projects budget' - and her contract - were to be transferred to a new initiative aimed at engaging young (16-25) local fathers with pre-school children. But the project had become important within lives, within weekly routines and rhythms: it was a place (both material and discursive) of meaning. At one of the last sessions of the project, several women suggested that we should continue the group, elsewhere. Some of the project users, Anna, and both us volunteers formed a management committee, figured out the process and paperwork, registered as an independent not-for-profit organisation, raised funds and continue to meet as 'Families Unite in Newcastle'<sup>4</sup> - FUN. Along the way, defining research questions with the group became less appropriate, and this 'participatory research' morphed into long term, ethnographic ... let's call it 'activist research' for now<sup>5</sup>.

*Insert Figure 1 here: FUN on a day trip to the countryside.*

It hasn't been easy, there have been many problems (logistics, communication, politics) along the way, and (at time of writing) we've just been through a period with no meetings after discussion earlier in the year regarding whether to end the group. A recent government

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<sup>4</sup> The name was agreed at an early management committee meeting – a key aim discussed was to open up to non-refugees and asylum seeking families and beyond Byker ... progress on this remains tentative.

<sup>5</sup> However, I agree with Pickerill (2008) that 'participation' in something is not research in itself: methodology is important, and, although not the direct focus of this paper, a point I return to at the end.

initiative to clear a 'backlog' of asylum claims pertaining to claimants with families, had resulted in many FUN members being granted refugee status. Several either left the area or felt that they no longer needed the specific support of talking/being with people in the same 'limbo' situation – they moved on with their lives and stopped coming to FUN. Ultimately the management committee decided to continue, sessions started up again, and the moment described at the start of the paper was the first meeting back after the break. It was an emotional moment, one of many over the past three years. What I hope (and it is very much a feeling as well as intention as I sit at the computer writing) to do is explore the role of emotion in doing activist research, and the ways in which emotions are embodied and emergent, mobile and relational across space and place – I *feel* compelled to be involved with FUN, being involved precipitates new/more emotions, and, crucially, these feelings cross over into all other aspects of my work and everyday life, and emotions work back again into research.

### **... placing my writing ...**

What this paper also attempts is some resistance to normalised academic structures of writing. Liz Bondi (2002: 3) clearly highlights the paradox facing feminist academics (among others) when writing their work:

“even if such claims [to accuracy and objectivity in the production of knowledge] are disavowed within textual productions, they are simultaneously invoked by the genre.”

I choose to adopt a narrative strategy/style that endeavours to disrupt/challenge/question dominant writing construction as part of my own commitment to critical engagement, following Helene Cixous' (1991) conceptualisation of writing as 'a call to action, revolution and transgression' (see Crang 2003; Hughes et al. 1999; McGregor et al. 2007). Moreover,

there are emotions caught up in writing<sup>6</sup> - the paper doesn't address this issue explicitly, but I wish to foreground it now in anticipation that you'll hold onto it throughout, since for me it is folded into the words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs (see Ahmed et al. 2000, regarding how we develop 'relationships with the texts') ... As Katy Bennett (1999: 120) explains, regarding a key theme of intersubjectivity which runs through this piece:

"It is not just about you reading me, but being aware of yourself reading, feeling, and being touched by that feeling. Maybe now I am able to take you on my exploration of intersubjectivity. This way I might not have to tell you, tie myself up in knots telling you, what it is. It is not easily told, but far easier felt."

While any piece of writing must be structured somehow, boundaries between sections here are artificial in that I want to deconstruct the dualisms between activism/research and research/emotion, following many feminist and critical academics before me (Gibson-Graham 1994; McDowell 1997; Rose 1993; Stanley and Wise 1993; to name but a few): this paper, then, is unapologetic in its blurring across segments ...

"Activism (<sup>1</sup>æktɪvɪz(ə)m):

1. A philosophical theory which assumes the objective reality and active existence of everything; assumes the 'objective' validity and 'real' being of entities and relations, as well as the fundamental relational complexes of space, time, number, and change.
2. A doctrine or policy of advocating energetic action.

Hence **activist** (<sup>1</sup>æktɪvɪst), an advocate of activism in either sense; also *attrib.*

(passing into *a.*) = **activistic** *a.*"

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<sup>6</sup> Not least "the shame of not being equal to the interest of one's subject" (Probyn 2005: xvii).

(Oxford English Dictionary (OED) 2008a)

In being asked to contribute to this special issue, I must to some degree come across as being an activist of some kind. Well, I go to conferences/seminars, read articles, have conversations with colleagues, etc. which are (at least in part) concerned with notions of activism. But I haven't ever described myself as an 'activist academic' ... In writing this piece, then, I've been thinking hard about what 'activism' is, and where and how it may be connected to 'what I do' – alongside the role of emotion/s in and across the spaces and places of my life as an academic.

Paul Chatterton et al. (2007) *do* describe themselves as 'academic-activists', which they define as consciously striving to bring themselves into contact with social movement groups, and to participate with them in research, alongside being involved in social struggles themselves. This is linked to well-established concerns around the 'relevance' of the academy, and calls for social scientists (especially) to engage with 'real' social problems (see Bunge 1979; Cobarrubias 2007; Harvey 1974; Robinson 2003; Ward 2005). Audrey Kobayashi explains:

“'[t]he political is not only personal, it is a commitment to deconstruct the barrier between the academy and the lives of the people it professes to represent”  
(Kobayashi in Nast 1994: 57).

Paul Routledge's (1996: 411) conceptualisation of 'critical engagement' as 'third space' is useful here: foregrounding the ways in which activism and academia interconnect, he suggests that “critical engagement enables research to become a personal and reflexive project of resistance.” Such thinking resonates closely with long developed feminist critiques which outline how 'we' embody our construction of knowledge through our inter/subjectivity/ies (eg. Bondi et al. 2002).

*Insert Figure 2 here: Inter/subjectivity in practice*

Furthermore, Rachel Pain (2003) writes about 'action-orientated research', arguing that "activism exists in a continuum and is embedded to some extent in all our activity as academics", also emphasising that 'we' recognise our own roles within unequal power relations and the practices that emerge from them, and are aware of our part in reiterating social and spatial injustices as part of trying to tackle such injustices (see also Cloke 2002; Peake and Kobayashi 2002; Routledge 2003).

As Kevin Ward (2007: 696) points out, such interventions "might be best understood as a small number of human geographers experiencing a periodic urge to reflect on how to make a difference", and importantly stresses the need to think policy (and action) research beyond geography and the global north<sup>7</sup>. Nonetheless, this (re)construction of academics as among 'real world' actors – as members of the publics we research/work with - is critical when thinking through the spaces of research and academic productions: we *embody* our geographies in community spaces and beyond, as well as the classroom, conference halls, university offices and meeting rooms; 'we', in part, constitute and perform the publics we engage with. While whether we identify (with this) as 'activist', 'public', 'participatory' and/or 'policy' academics incorporates some important differences, there are, as Pain (2006) outlines, commonalities across these bodies of interest<sup>8</sup> ...

...OK, so far so good, 'we' academic-activists recognise and value "*objective' validity and 'real' being of entities and relations*" to quote the OED definition above; likewise, implicit and

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<sup>7</sup> While this paper is situated in the global north in general, there are webs of connections across a range of spatial scales, not least via migration, that it's only possible to hint at here: at the same time, activism and academy will be differentially contextualised in non-UK situations (and in non-Northumbrian situations!)

<sup>8</sup> See resurgent debate regarding the 'public intellectual' in particular, (e.g. Castree 2006; Fuller and Askins 2007; Mitchell 2008).

explicit within such activist academy is a commitment to changing this 'real' world (the publics with whom we engage and are part of), employing "A doctrine or policy of advocating energetic action". While I feel uncomfortable thinking of myself as doctrinaire, **action is key** (often though not always energetic). The motivation for undertaking such action is generally ascribed to an 'ideological commitment' to social and personal change of one type or another (Fuller and Kitchen 2004), but where does this ideological commitment come from? For a long time, dominant discourse has linked 'real' and 'objective' with 'rational' and 'mind', reading/constructing this ideological commitment as a product of rational thinking. Such Modernism excludes the 'irrational', the 'embodied', but, following challenges to mind/body dualisms by feminist theorists (Butler 1993; Haraway 1988), the inspirational role of emotion to activism has more recently been invoked, paying attention to the emotions stimulated by activism and how these re-circulate to sustain it (Bosco 2007; Flam and King 2005).

For me, the role of emotion is central to activism, and I would argue that most accounts of activism touch upon 'sense', 'feeling', that inexplicable desire to 'do something' in some way. For example, Jo-Anne Lee (2007) stresses the need to think carefully about community-based activism, in particular highlighting the way in which *developing personal social bonds* (through sharing food/communal meals and gift giving) were key to mobilising and sustaining women as activists. While Lee doesn't draw explicitly on emotion within her analysis, I found the text implicitly rich with feeling. Similarly, the stunning (in many senses of the word!) book 'Activists Speak Out' (Cieri and Peeps 2000) doesn't focus on emotion, but the emotional is threaded throughout the candid personal narratives detailing sometimes harrowing, sometimes hopeful accounts of different activisms across the USA. And Cindi Katz' (2008: 25) rigorous exposition of the endemic social and spatial inequalities in New Orleans laid bare after Hurricane Katrina, through an exploration of activist responses to these inequalities, is both a well-justified indictment of 'hostile privatism and consumer citizenship' as well as a deeply moving account of local people whose hopes, fears, happiness, grief and actions are linked directly to their material social geographies.

More explicitly, Laura Pulido (2003) discusses the 'interior life of politics' to situate emotion (and ethics) as 'inside of us as individuals', as an 'unspoken and often unrecognised force' compelling us to action. Highlighting the links between internal and external worlds, she argues that

“as social scientists, we need to acknowledge this rich terrain of emotions, consciousness, and thought located in the interior, if we wish to grasp the breadth, depth, and dynamic nature of political activism.” (Pulido 2003: 48)

Likewise, Chatterton et al. (2007) point to the importance of 'the emotional dimensions' in enabling transformative encounters with others, emotional responses that come from experiences, intuition and 'a sense of injustice'. They outline how feelings such as frustration and anger are/may be harnessed within activism, since these emotions also contain hope and can thus play out through a 'prefigurative politics' linked to notions of solidarity, care and responsibility<sup>9</sup>. Fernando Bosco (2007: 546) points to the ways in which social movements originating in Argentina *strategically* deployed and framed emotion in order to develop activism:

“it is significant that much of what can explain the sustainability and expansion of the two networks has to do with the emotions of activism and with the emotional connections among participants themselves and among participants and their supporters.”

Bosco links such strategic mobilisation to the concept of 'emotional labour' (after Hochschild 1983), which suggests that management of emotions (our own and other people's) is undertaken to nurture the social networks central to social movements; while Bella Vivat (2002) perceptively describes how 'emotional work' (in the research context) is perceived not

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<sup>9</sup> See also Massey (2004) regarding 'geographies of responsibility'.

as work, but as *innate*, as “just how I am” – rather than something consciously worked at, a ‘research performance’.

But what I want to get at here are the *geographies* of activist emotion, in particular a *blurring beyond* the ‘traditional’, normalised spaces and places of activism<sup>10</sup>. Jenny Pickerill and Paul Chatterton (2006), drawing on personal experiences within activist networks, usefully conceptualise ‘autonomous geographies’ as ‘multiscalar strategies’, operating across space and time, creativity and resistance. They point to the need to appreciate the ways in which spaces of protest and everyday life combine in people’s attempts to effect meaningful social change. Similarly, Ruth Fincher and Ruth Panelli (2001) explore the complex interconnections across professional, public and private spaces experienced by women activists in Australia in their attempts to both define ‘strategic identities’ and utilise different places within their activism. In particular, the use of public space to ‘gain visibility’ and safe, private space to communicate and develop raises questions to what ‘activist space’ might mean. Indeed, Jane Hardy et al. (2008) discuss the importance of paying attention to ‘new spaces of activism’ in which Polish women articulate their interests beyond the formal workplace.

Personally, my role with the FUN group grew out of anger and indignation that the funded project wasn’t valued and supported by the organisation running it, despite the incredible benefits I witnessed it offering to marginalised people every week. Many project users also described having these emotions, others expressed feeling ‘sad’, ‘upset’, ‘rejected’. And it was out of this problem *and the feelings that circulated through it* that action was stimulated: our combined desire to ‘do something about it’ led us to set up FUN; my desire to ‘do something’ leads me to take on an activist academic role. Because I *feel passionately* about these issues, because I feel it *in my gut* ... anger, frustration, desire, hope, outrage ... and

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<sup>10</sup> I’m not talking here about emotional attachments *TO* a place which stimulate activism when that place is threatened: such place-based activism perhaps has more/different layers of emotional geographies attached to it than I’m trying to explore here.

because I can't disconnect these emotions from my everyday life, my family, my past and my future: we carry our emotional reactions to issues/situations/encounters with others across space; these reactions reverberate spatially and temporally, feeding back into different parts of our lives, our worlds ...

FUN may not strike you as activism with a capital 'A' – it's not directly connected to a national/global social movement, it's not that 'direct action', standing-at-the-barricades activity that I've also engaged in. Ian Maxey (1999, 199) challenges fixed ideas surrounding what constitutes activism, reminding us that activism itself is discursively produced - 'actively constructed in a range of ways' - and that it is critical to view the term broadly to "reclaim 'activism' so that it may inspire and engage people in inclusive, emancipator ways" (Maxey 1999, 200; see also Pickerill 2008). FUN is about working towards social change at the local level, and as such it's important not only to undertake the activism, but also to highlight key issues among as broad a local public as possible in order to effect any sustainable, meaningful change. Thus I see engagement with FUN as intertwined with local voluntary work that I do, aimed at challenging social and environmental injustices, with how I raise my children ... and with my approaches to being an academic *beyond research*.

I return to such issues later, but before moving on want to inject a critical note. As Cook et al. (2006) clearly identify, it is dangerous to reify one type of research/approach (i.e. radical or activist<sup>11</sup>) as *the* way to enact/enable social change, and didactic if we lose sight of the ways in which indirect, *less obviously political* ways of doing/approaching academic roles may also effect change. Key here is that academics should look to "change relationships between research, writing, teaching, learning and assessment" (Cook et al. 2006: 1113) in order to achieve meaningful, sustainable social change. We need to avoid being didactic about

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<sup>11</sup> We also need to question what type of activism is being discussed. There's a presumption that 'we' are changing the world for 'the better' without unpacking what our 'better' is – right-wing activism thrives alongside autonomous or socialist activism, and we can't assume all academics are 'Left' (cf. debate in geography regarding what we mean by 'Left' ... eg. Amin and Thrift 2005; Smith 2005).

emotion too - this paper is NOT suggesting that anyone conducting 'less activist' (or 'less public' or 'less participatory') research doesn't feel/experience emotion. Indeed, I would argue that all research is predicated on and in some way involves -

“Emotion (*ɪ*ˈmɔːʃən) :

**1.** A moving out, migration, transference from one place to another. *Obs.* **2.** A moving, stirring, agitation, perturbation (in physical sense). *Obs.* **3.** *transf.* A political or social agitation; a tumult, popular disturbance. *Obs.* **4. a. fig.** Any agitation or disturbance of mind, feeling, passion; any vehement or excited mental state. **b.** *Psychology.* A mental 'feeling' or 'affection' (e.g. of pleasure or pain, desire or aversion, surprise, hope or fear, etc.), as distinguished from cognitive or volitional states of consciousness. Also *abstr.* 'feeling' as distinguished from the other classes of mental phenomena.

(OED 2008b)

Emotional, *a* (*ɪ*ˈmɔːʃənəl):

**1.** Connected with, based upon, or appealing to, the feelings or passions. **2.** Liable to emotion; easily affected by emotion. Also in philosophical sense, characterized by the capacity for emotion. Also *absol.* quasi-*n.*”

(OED 2008c)

I'm including definitions from the OED because, for me, they 'represent' the paradox surrounding how to put in words what is 'felt'. There's a lot of sadness at FUN. Tears in fear of asylum claims being denied and being forcibly removed; crying in frustration when claims aren't processed month after month; upset and anger at the too-often experienced racism; frustration at the helplessness of not knowing what is happening to loved ones; grieving for

absent family and friends, who may be in immediate danger– or on hearing the worst news. There's a lot of happiness at FUN. Screams of joy when refugee status is gained by someone in the group; giggles at a child's comedic behaviour; smiling compliments paid when anyone turns up with a new hairstyle/coat/dress/bag; chuckles of amusement at cultural and language misunderstandings; happy exclamations of surprise at any piece of good news; contented 'mmms' attend every meal cooked and served.

My point here is that, despite differences in background throughout the group, as far as I can tell emotions are shared. As parents, especially as mothers, there is collective concern about children's welfare. As people, tears in someone's eyes as they recount an horrific/scary situation quickly begets tears in many eyes; smiles spread on recognition and circulation of happiness. Some things each of us may only be able to sympathize with; other experiences some members of the group have in common and empathize more directly. There have been moments at FUN where I *know* that people are sharing emotion. I *feel* it. There's no other way to say it, I can't prove it or even really research it, it's beyond representation ... Sometimes this includes me, sometimes not – I want to emphasize here emotional essentialism NOT universalism, drawing on the work of Elspeth Probyn (2005: xiii) when she writes:

“while in some circles this essentialism may be considered heretical, it seems to me that we miss a great deal when we disregard our human similarities.”

Arguing that shame is biologically innate, Probyn connects more broadly to a physiological humanism that's important to consider in order to “reflect on what makes us different and the same” (xiv). And it is this physiological aspect of emotion that I also believe is important ... same/similar biological feelings are physically experienced across social and cultural difference – and across space and place.

*Insert Figure 3 here: Happiness – a shared biological emotion?*

Certainly, emotions are not apropos of nothing. Emotions, as Deborah Lupton observes (cited in Wood 2002: 63), are “shaped, experienced and interpreted through social and cultural phenomena”. Moreover, emotions are socially produced and productive of “subjects and the power relations that constitute them” (Harding and Pribram 2002: 421). While according to the OED above, emotion is ‘a feeling’ distinguished from a ‘cognitive’ state, how we *make sense* of these physical senses, then, is also part of the deal. But, as Probyn argues, we shouldn’t approach arguments about the physiology of ‘emotion’ as holding more or less ontological truth than those based in cultural and social construction – rather we should be asking what these different notions might offer each other, what they offer to reconceptualising emotion.

What I understand by ‘emotion’ in this paper, then, is at the same time, *both* physical feeling *and* a conscious making sense of that feeling. Emotions are contextual, embodied and socially constructed - and deconstructed and reconstructed in fluid, plural and emergent processes; emotions are relational across relational spaces. As such, the feelings that motivate action/involvement in FUN can’t be disconnected from experiences and emotional registers across the rest of my life, the past as well as present, distant and near ... subjective emotions *from elsewhere* are inherently caught up in the emotions experienced as an activist academic. What I want to think a little more carefully about here is *how* emotions travel, *how* they circulate. And that means, I think, that I need to engage with notions of affect<sup>12</sup>.

“Affect (*Brit.* /əˈfekt/, *U.S.* /əˈfɛk(t)/):

I. Senses relating to the mind.

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<sup>12</sup> And this genuinely scares me, as I have been struggling to understand the debates I’m about to stumble through for some time.

**1. a.** The manner in which one is inclined or disposed; (also) the capacity for willing or desiring; a mental state, mood, or emotion, *esp.* one regarded as an attribute of a more general state; a feeling, desire, intention. *Obs.* **b.** An inner disposition or feeling (rather than an external manifestation or action); intent, intention, earnest, reality [...] *Obs.* **c.** More generally: a disposition, temper; a natural tendency. *Obs.* **2. a.** Feeling towards or in favour of a person or thing; kindly feeling, affection; [...] **5. Philos.** An emotional, unreflective response. *Obs.* **b. Psychol.** (and *Psychiatry*). A feeling or subjective experience accompanying a thought or action or occurring in response to a stimulus; an emotion, a mood. In later use also (usu. as a mass noun): the outward display of emotion or mood, as manifested by facial expression, posture, gestures, tone of voice, etc.”

(OED 2008d)

Arguing that the emotional should not be distanced from academic scholarship, Deborah Thien (2005: 452) offers a useful overview of intellectual approaches to affect, whose commonality lie in the idea of affect as the ‘motion of emotion’. She warns against any positing of “the binary trope of emotion as negatively positioned in opposition to reason, as objectionably soft and implicitly feminized” – which is apt to occur if we jettison ‘emotion’ in favour of ‘affect’ through a construction of the former as (only) a ‘personal quality’ and the latter as social and therefore allowing political engagement. Thien rightly contests any dualism between ‘personal’ and ‘political’ geographies (see also Anderson and Smith 2001), maintaining that we need to continue to pay attention to emotion as part of intersubjective processes that are spatially embedded (after Probyn’s (2003) ‘spatial imperative of subjectivity’): that deconstruction of emotion-individual versus affect-social is crucial within the development of any model of affect. It seems to me that if we hold onto the notion of emotion as *both* physically embodied (personal) *and* reflectively constructed (social), then such a binary is no longer possible. What might this mean to conceptualising affect, then?

The OED definition above suggests affect as inside of us, 'resulting' in outward displays, which would point to affect as biological/physical. Indeed, Probyn (2005: 25) writes that emotion is often/generally elided with the social sciences and affect with biological sciences, that "it could be convenient to say that emotion refers to the social expression of affect, and affect in turn is the biological and physiological experience of it." Affect here refers to those *within-the-body* processes which impact upon and intensify how we 'feel': eg. I feel differently and with differing intensities when I'm premenstrually hormonal, and certainly the effect of hormones on emotion has been a topic of conversation among women at FUN (and I want to stress that hormonal *does not* equate to 'irrational', a 'slur' so often attributed to women's groups/studies/actions, see Wright 2008). To me, such physiological focus resonates with that 'transhuman' notion of affect which outlines the need to pay close attention to neuroscience and 'neural geographies' (see McCormack 2006).

So far, so contra to the recent geographical debate regarding affect as social/political that concerns Thien (2005, vis-à-vis Thrift 2004). However, through a careful examination of affect as *not having predetermined objects* - unlike drives, which are always motivated towards a particular something (eg. hunger, thirst) - Probyn (2005: 26) describes how individuals can 'care' about/are interested in different things in quite different ways. And this crucially involves interweaving between/across physiological and psychological processes: "the body minds, and the mind is bodied" ... such that "each feeling contains an awareness of its relation to other feelings". Again, as with emotion, affect appears to be both sensation *and* involve cognitive function (see Brown and Stenner 2001 regarding Spinoza, affect and the inseparability of body and mind).

Now, at this point I find Sara Ahmed's (2004: 39) contention that we shouldn't separate affect and emotion useful - that we shouldn't distinguish between conscious recognition and 'direct' physical feeling as this "negates how what is not consciously experienced may still be mediated by past experiences". Ahmed's broader argument is that emotions don't belong to

an individual and then move outwards, but that “they define the contours of the multiple worlds that are inhabited by different subjects” (25); that how we feel about others connects us to a collective (via the role of emotions in boundary-making); and, moreover, that these feelings are mediated by ‘histories that stick’. Ahmed maintains that unconscious, physical responses are embedded in past histories through *embodied memories*, and impact upon our actions just as cognitive processes do via social construction. Importantly, affect can’t be reduced to the (only) personal/biological any more than emotion, in that it is caught up in the memory-making of our bodies *in the world*. Emotions are subjective and contextual, *affected by place and* our interactions with other people – intersubjectivities - thus we are always being produced and producing selves and others through situated, relational perspectives (Bondi 2005). It seems, then, that both emotion and affect are mediated by histories *and* dynamic and emergent.

I want to connect briefly here to the notion of ‘testimony’, a concept that Warren (1997) outlines as the deployment of emotional and emotive narratives by people fleeing/resisting violence and oppression<sup>13</sup>. The power of personal/personalised accounts of harassment and abuse lies in how ‘witnessing’ moves from narrator to listener specifically through emotional engagement with such testimony, and then beyond: as I have heard and thus witnessed individual accounts of social injustices in group meetings, I am motivated to further circulate these narratives by their emotional authority/command - to ‘give voice’ to them and their speakers. *I am affected by* the Rwandan man who hurried home from neighbouring Congo on hearing news of civil unrest on the radio, to find 17 members of his immediate family lying where they had been slaughtered; by the woman from Sierra Leone and her two young daughters deeply traumatised by experiencing/escaping civil war, and by being forcibly removed from Newcastle by Home Office officials; by the mother gagged and restrained on the flight to Belgium to prevent her resistance, an abuse of human rights recognised by

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<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee for suggesting the inclusion of this phenomenon here.

Belgian officials who refused to send her on to Sierra Leone, but demanded her return to the UK; by the grandmother from Sri Lanka, who constantly fears what may happen to family members remaining in that country, fears embedded in her own horrific experiences of suffering and made almost unbearable by an inconsolable guilt around her own survival.

People share their experiences quietly and with dignity: "giving authority to subaltern voices through the *testimonio* genre" (Warren 1997: 22). Everyone in the group is affected in different and similar ways, consciously and subconsciously, through embodied histories and reverberating emotions, being produced and (re)producing our selves through the telling and hearing of testimony. I think about it like this: emotions are how I respond (how I care about/show interest in something); affect is what intensifies my response (or my capacity to be affected). Both are physiological (preconsciously bodied) *and* socially circulating; both are caught up in past associations/experiences/histories, *and* dynamic and emergent. And all of this influences how I feel across space and place. What, then, does this mean for me as an -

"Academic (ækə'dɛmɪk):

**A. adj.**

**1.** Belonging to the Academy, the school or philosophy of Plato; sceptical. **2.** Of or belonging to an academy or institution for higher learning; hence, collegiate, scholarly. **3.** Of or belonging to a learned society, or association for the promotion of art or science; of or belonging to an Academician. **4.** Not leading to a decision; unpractical; theoretical, formal, or conventional.

**B. n.** [The adj. used *absol.*]

**1.** An ancient philosopher of the Academy, an adherent of the philosophical school of Plato; a Platonist. **2.** A member of a college or university; a collegian. Now *spec.* a senior member of a university; a member of the academic staff of a university or

college; also *loosely*, an academically-gifted person. **3.** A member of a society for promoting art or science.”

(OED, 2008e)

I am keen to deconstruct the ‘activist versus theorist’ dualism that haunts discussion around the relevance of academy (Peake and Kobayashi 2002) and is reiterated in the distinction between theory/activism in **A4** above – I want to *think* here about the different roles of an activist-academic, and draw together how emotion and affect weave through (and beyond) the spaces and places of our work ...

Perhaps I should start by saying that I’m motivated to be an academic in the first place by emotion. I feel passionately about social and environmental issues, which intensifies an array of emotions embedded in a range of experiences, and how I make sense of them, across many times and many places ... I worked in ‘vocational’ positions in charitable organisations for several years, in several countries, trying to ‘make a difference’ ‘on the ground’. Over time, I became increasingly frustrated and angered at policy and practice changes that were well-intended but lacked thinking and/or committed research, either failing to improve situations, improving some aspects but creating new problems/inequalities, or making things a whole lot worse. The same could be said for many of the various social movements I’ve been associated with over time. Maybe, I thought, it’s time to do some research and thinking myself and try to effect change in different ways.

Now that I’m based in a university, those emotions and affects from previous work and life experiences compel me to adopt specific work practices – to do the research and thinking in ethically sensitive and socially transformative ways; to do ‘good work’ in line with my passions rather than structures of academia (see Pickerill 2008). That is, emotions and

affects slide across any lingering barriers between public and private, activist and academic: for me, while I recognise the utility and necessity of analytical compartmentalization, life just isn't that delineated. It's complex, it's messy, it's ... emotive and emotional.

*Insert Figure 4 here: emotional connections*

So when I'm lecturing, facilitating seminars, seeing students as guidance tutor, dissertation supervisor, I have my body, my emotions, my subjectivity/ies with me too, as much as when I'm activist-researching. My passion for social and environmental justice isn't switched off in the classroom or office: as it feeds through my personal life so it feeds through learning and teaching approaches. For example, if someone makes a racist/sexist/homophobic/xenophobic comment I react emotionally – as a 'professional' I have to think carefully about my response, how I go about challenging such comments, be calm and clear in my own feelings so that I may respond with respect to the emotions of others (see Cahill 2007), *use my mind* to address the situation ... But at the same time my gut lurches, my breast heaves, *my body* tenses. Paul Chatterton (2008: 421) argues that working as a 'public activist-scholar' is also about "radical education and the public debate of ideas which challenge the norm", and I've written elsewhere about the surprise of such embodied encounters and how they cut across everyday and work spaces (Askins 2008b) - my point here is that emotions are bound up in *encounters within* as well as beyond spaces of teaching and learning.

Indeed, some of the pedagogical and 'research-led teaching' literature, while rarely explicit about emotion, arguably points to the positive role of emotions in 'deep learning approaches', in the sense of developing a broader perspective on what 'learning' might mean – eg. Henry Giroux on 'border pedagogy'; Ian Cook's exhortation to students to think

across academic writing/theory and their personal lives (Cook undated); the use of participatory approaches within the classroom (Askins 2008c; Hopkins 2006); work highlighting the particular benefits of fieldwork to student learning (Panelli and Welch 2007), especially offering 'co-learning' opportunities (Evans et al. 2007; Le Heron et al. 2007). Key among this work is the *social aspect* of experiencing learning together as a group, co-producing (new) knowledges through interpersonal relationships, and, critically, the role of space and place in enabling such subjective (as positive) learning experiences.

In line with these ideas, I consider the research with FUN linked through/across my other academic activities, and FUN enters the classroom both formally and informally. For example, for the past three years, one member of the group has come to talk with students about his experiences as a refugee coming from Rwanda. I was nervous about asking the group if anyone wanted to come into university and talk – there are many sensitive, ethical issues involved<sup>14</sup> – but this individual feels strongly that not enough 'real refugee voices are heard'. His talk is honest, open, and very moving. It makes a deep impression on many of the students<sup>15</sup> (they tell me this afterwards), and shifts their perceptions around asylum seekers, refugees, and 'others' more generally, as evidenced in the reflective diary assignment through which the module is assessed.

But as I write I'm deeply aware of my privileged position, the power relations caught up in my involvement with FUN, and the problematic ethics around research, encounters and representation. I wonder what the hell I'm doing, who do I think I am? That anxiety about my role and place in FUN I mentioned right at the start. Because while I *hope* that I offer something positive to us, as a group, effecting social change in some small ways, I **know** that I gain from being part of FUN, most especially a sense of renewed purpose: I leave

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<sup>14</sup> One small attempt to balance potential problems here is that the University are billed for a 'guest lecturer' and the money goes into the FUN account.

<sup>15</sup> The majority of students at Northumbria are local to the north east of England; none taking the module so far have ever had direct contact with a refugee before.

every meeting inspired by the strength, commitment and care so evident among other members. I've been arguing in this paper that emotions play an important role in motivating the 'activist-academic', that emotional becomings, relational across space and place, are caught up in radical approaches to making the academy relevant. I've drawn on a rich body of literature that has been arguing this for a long time, as well as an emerging – and related – chorus of voices now overtly reflecting upon the emotional dimension of their work. It is critical that we ask ourselves, then, what does such recognition of the significance of emotion mean? Beyond reflection, what is the value of emotional knowings/doings? I turn now to consider some implications for (activist) academic practice.

Foremost, for me, is a (re)thinking around research design and methods. If we are to take our own and research participants' emotions seriously, we should address their potential and impact within the framing of our broader research questions; how we negotiate research ethics; the relationships developed through empirical encounters in the field, and how we ultimately withdraw from them; the ways in which we supervise others' research and/or are supervised; and our relations with co-researchers. I highlighted 'participatory (action) research' earlier, and I believe that such methods offer the potential for open, reflective, responsive and dynamic approaches (see Kesby 2007; Kindon et al. 2007) that enable/allow for 'emotional work' among researchers and participants. Participatory methods are certainly not unproblematic, though (see Cooke and Kothari 2001), neither are they always appropriate/rigorous in different research contexts. Rather, I'm arguing here for a transparency around emotion in the research process: in setting aside time and space, in both our *planning and conduct* of research, to work with/through emotional dimensions; in recognising that there may also be emotional needs to address/support beyond the specific research encounter; and in writing funding applications, grant proposals, etc. that take account of/provide for such experiences/events.

Following on from this, we should pay attention to emotion regarding the dissemination of research too. The ethics and politics of research publication has been addressed within literature around 'academic relevance', in particular *where* we write (eg. Fuller and Kitchin 2004); and feminist scholars have long discussed *how* we write in terms of both political strategy and emphasising intersubjectivity (Bennett 1999; Bondi et al. 2002; Cixous 1991). This paper is an example: there are deep concerns among many geographers/academics regarding Reed Elsevier and the arms trade (as witnessed via debate on the Critical Geography Forum, informal conversations at conferences, etc.) and I thought long and hard as an activist-academic about submitting work to this journal – my decision to go ahead ultimately hanging on Reed Elsevier's statement of intent, at time of writing, to withdraw from such business (see Chatterton 2008). I also expended much energy and emotion *in the writing*, specifically as challenge to the more objective, 'traditional' style dominant in academic outputs/publications: this writing strategy often leaves me frustrated when papers are rejected on the grounds that they don't conform to 'an acceptable academic structure and language'. We can – and should – publish elsewhere, but we should also pursue the emotional in writing within hegemonic academia in order to shift what is 'acceptable' (see Keith 1992 on 'angry writing' for example!).

These issues can be further linked to dissemination beyond writing. It upsets and angers me that many conferences/seminars (in my discipline anyway) adhere to structures that predominantly exclude engagement with emotions. And this connects to those debates around affect, emotion and non-representational or beyond-representational theory (Thrift 2004; Lorimer 2008) ... a serious consideration of the emotional doings and knowings in (activist) research must prompt us to rethink our practices around circulating 'research outcomes'. Certainly, sessions that dispense with paper presentations and/or panel discussions can be threatening to an established/expected order, but in so being there emerges a potentiality of/for new/other ways of engaging in and with emotions. Such

concerns around doing and telling research can also be related to pedagogical approaches, of course, and I have touched on these above.

The critical point that I want to end on, though, is that recognition of the significance of emotion and what it means for academic practice is anathema to how the academy operates within dominant neoliberalising processes. We are seeing increasing demands on our time, ever more pressure to perform a diverse set of roles in a range of contexts (research, teaching, administrative, marketing, departmental strategizing, widening participation, policy input – see Fuller and Askins 2007), such that finding/making time and space for emotions is increasingly unlikely. Indeed, Laurie and Bondi (2005) warn us of our own collusion, through processes of 'professionalization', within productions of neoliberal governance ... processes and productions which place any 'activist-academic' in an ambivalent relationship with our 'employers'. So I want to make a plea: for academics to remain/become increasingly aware of our own practices in excluding emotions – and jeopardising our emotional well-being too!

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